

# *Field Report*

## **Iditarod National Historic Trail**

### ■ 1.0 Summary

The Iditarod National Historic Trail (Iditarod NHT) is a historic transportation network of over 2,300 miles in Alaska. Though the network of trails extends over federal, state, native corporation, and local lands, the BLM coordinates the management of the trail. The mission of the Iditarod NHT is to preserve the historical significance of the trail, while providing recreational opportunities for local and non-local visitors.

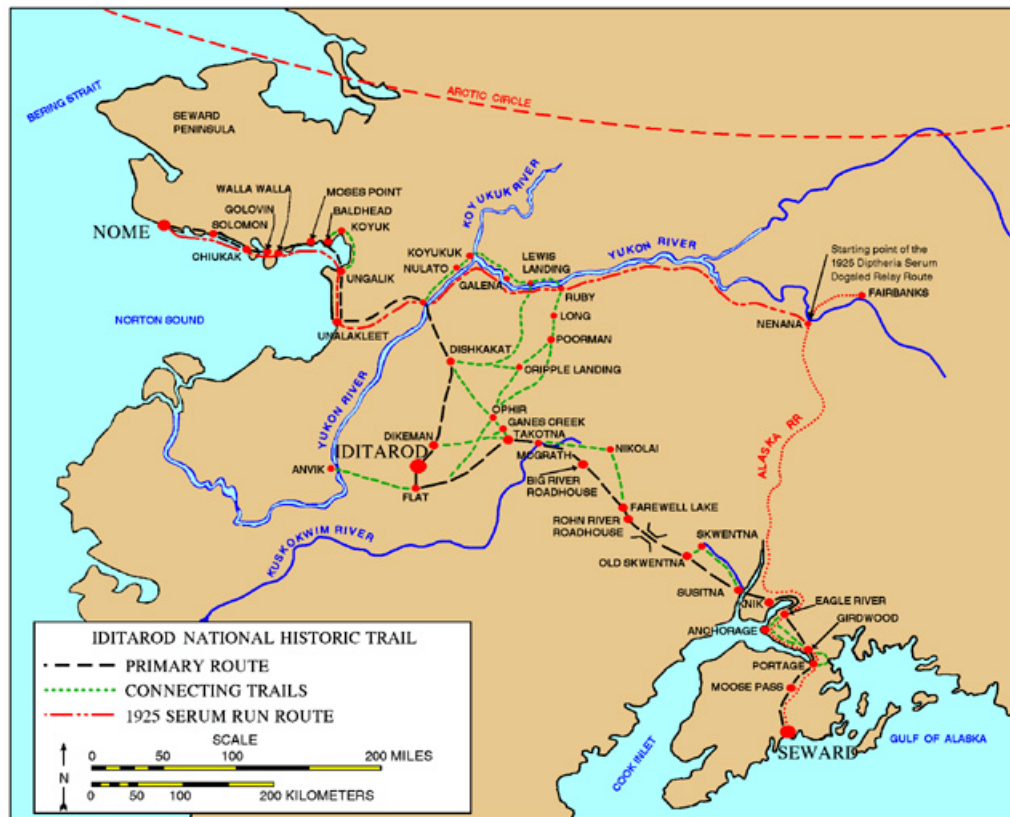
While the total number of visitors to the trail is unknown, the largest single event on the trail, the Iditarod Sled Dog Race, attracts approximately 20,000 people. Other attractions on the trail draw anywhere from a few hundred to 30,000 people. New attractions on the trail expect to attract almost 125,000 people.

Due to the geographically and temporally dispersed activities of the Iditarod Trail, an Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) would be difficult to sustain between major events and would need to cover a number of widely dispersed destinations. Improving the service levels of existing transportation systems during events could be a way to mitigate the congestion that takes place during those times, in addition to making transit part of the visitor experience. Existing local transit services whose service could be improved to meet the needs of Iditarod NHT events may include the Alaska Railroad, the Seward Bus Company, and the Seward Trolley.

### ■ 2.0 Background Information

#### 2.1 Location

The Iditarod NHT is a network of over 2,300 miles in Alaska. The primary historic route is approximately 1,000 miles long and connects Seward, Alaska to Nome, Alaska through Anchorage. Figure 1 shows the location of the Iditarod Trail through Alaska. Other towns along the route that have events associated with the trail and also derive recognition from their connection with the trail include Wasilla, Knik, and Iditarod, Alaska.

**Figure 1. Location of the Iditarod Trail**

## 2.2 Administration and Classification

The trail traverses a number of jurisdictions including federal, state, and native corporation lands as well as local municipalities, each of which exerts its own user rules and regulations. The BLM is the federally appointed coordinator for the trail and is a leader in the activities of the trail.

## 2.3 Physical Description

The trail passes through a number of Alaskan vegetation types, including forested and tundra-alpine areas. The majority of the trail is most accessible during the winter season when the ground is frozen. In the summer the muddy conditions of the trail make the northern sections difficult to pass. Southern sections of the trail, primarily from Seward to Anchorage through Girdwood, are accessible and usable year-round.

Roadway, rail line, and recreational trail right-of-ways run contiguous with much of the southern portion of the Iditarod Trail. New portions of the historic trail have been found through archeological survey.

## **2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Historic Trail**

The Iditarod NHT's mission is designed to provide recreational opportunities through the establishment of a national historic trail as legislated by the National Trails System Act of 1968. The Iditarod NHT comprehensive management plan adds to this mission a goal to manage and protect the history and integrity of the trail. Within the context of these goals the BLM is responsible for the coordination of all trail partners for the continued management of the resource.

## **2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile**

The total number of annual visitors is unknown because the trail is linear in nature, can be accessed from a multitude of places over 2,300 miles, considers events occurring at different locations and times of the year, and covers a large number of federal, state, native, and local lands. Each event and activity along the trail has an estimated number of visitors. The use categories for the trail fall into three general categories: competitive, recreational, and transportation.

The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race is the most famous of the competitive uses of the trail (see Figure 2). The Iditarod Race is likened to the “Superbowl” of Alaska and is the pinnacle of the Alaskan state sport of mushing. In 1999 there were 58 mushers in the race. Approximately 15,000 to 20,000 spectators were on hand for the ceremonial start of the race in Anchorage. Approximately 5,000 to 6,000 spectators were present at the official start the following day in Wasilla. Less than 5,000 spectators were present at the finish line of the race in Nome, Alaska.

**Figure 2. Dogsled Transportation**



Other Iditarod winter sports include the Gold Rush Classic Snowmachine Race and the Iditasport Human Endurance Competition that includes skiers, runners, and mountain bikers. Summer sports on the trail include an annual marathon on a segment of the trail east of Anchorage over Crow Pass to Eagle River in Chugach State National Forest. The marathon attracts about 10,000 spectators.

The Iditarod Race headquarters in Wasilla, Alaska (see Figure 3), from which the race is planned and staffed, also includes summer attractions such as the Iditarod museum and exhibits, mushers' log cabin replica, and sled dog rides on a wheeled sled. Approximately 30,000 people visit the headquarters each summer.

**Figure 3. Iditarod Trail Headquarters**



Recreational uses of the trail available during the winter months include skiing, snowmachining, snowshoeing, and mushing. Summer uses available on the southern portions of the trail include hiking and biking near Girdwood, Portage Valley, and Chugach National Forest. Recreational users are both local and non-local. Non-local visitors often combine their visit to the Iditarod NHT with other local attractions such as a cruise (docking in Seward) and visits to the Kenai Fjords National Park, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and the Chugach National Forest. Though new trail improvements have been planned but are not yet complete, the projected annual use of the Girdwood-Iditarod Trail Route is expected to be 46,000 annual visitors in the third year of the operation and 123,000 visitors by the sixth year.

In northern Alaska the trail is currently used as a transportation route to remote places that have limited transportation and roadway access. Though this use is limited it is considered vital to the survival of remote towns.

## ■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

### 3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

There are a number of transportation modes used on the Iditarod NHT. In places where the trail has been covered by roadways or rail it is used by private cars and Alaska Railroad operated trains. In other places the trail is paved for walking or biking or has another type of treatment suitable for hiking. Segments of the trail that are typically

traversed by snowmachines or dog sleds are designated by distinct markers, cairns, or by packed snow used by other Iditarod travelers.

The Alaska Railroad carries freight and passengers through Seward, Anchorage, Denali National Park, Wasilla, and Fairbanks. While the railroad serves as a lifeline for freight to these remote areas, with passenger service primarily used for leisure or tourist travel. Many independent travelers (those who do not purchase all-inclusive packages) may opt to take the train from Seward to Denali. The train also stops at smaller towns such as Portage and Whittier. Skiers may take the train from Anchorage to Girdwood to ski at the Alyeska Resort. The Alaska Railroad has plans to double track the system in and around Anchorage and to build new facilities in Seward and at the airport.

Traffic issues are confined to a limited number of places along the trail during certain events. In the summer the town of Seward, Alaska, (location of mile 0 of the Iditarod Trail) experiences parking shortages due to the number of attractions in the town (see Figure 4). Seward is home to the Sea Life Center, Kenai Fjords National Park, the terminus of the Alaska Railroad, and the docking facilities for many Alaskan cruise ships. Although there is generally high use during the summer months Seward is most congested during the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend and the Salmon Derby in August.

**Figure 4. Seward Street Network Near the Trail (Left) and Parking Lot in Seward (Right)**



The Seward Bus Company provides one trip per day to and from Anchorage at a fee half that of the cruise ship companies. Both passengers and freight are carried on the bus. The majority of passengers using the bus company are through its charter services. The Seward Chamber of Commerce also provides a trolley in town.

Anchorage and Wasilla, Alaska, experience high traffic volumes and congestion during the week of the Iditarod Race. On the day of the race start in Wasilla, the city provides a shuttle bus from the local high school parking lot to the start of the race to ease traffic and parking problems.



### **3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

Due to the linearity and multiple access points of the trail, it is difficult to define a single gateway community. Girdwood, Seward, Anchorage, and Wasilla are the most likely candidates to be gateway communities to the Iditarod Trail due to activities that take place in or near those towns.

Just outside the Sea Life Center in Seward, Alaska, there is a marker that denotes MILE 0 of the Iditarod Trail. Adjacent to the mile marker is the only non-motorized paved portion of the trail. Seward is also the home of the Iditarod Trail Blazers, a volunteer group that provides trail maintenance and construction assistance. Though this part of the Trail is not used during the Iditarod Race, it is accessible during the summer months for hiking and local excursions.

In 1997, the Girdwood-Iditarod Trail Route Study was completed in an effort to “determine a feasible route for a commemorative Iditarod Trail linking Turnagain Arm and Girdwood to the Crow Pass-Iditarod Trailhead.” Included in the improvements planned for this trail is shared parking with a connecting trailhead at the old townsite. The Alyeska Resort is also located in Girdwood and has an intermodal connection to the Alaska Railroad.

Private bus tours once stopped at the race headquarters and the museum. Fewer tours stop since the race headquarters moved from the main road. The race coordinators feel that more visitors could be served if the race headquarters were more accessible.

### **3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

Segments of the Trail that are not covered by roadway or rail right-of-ways are maintained by volunteer groups, such as the Iditarod Trail Blazers, or by the jurisdiction in which the segment of the Trail passes. Both Federal and State agencies are active in maintaining the Trail.

The Trail as a cultural resource is promoted through the Iditarod Race. It is also promoted through the commemoration of the historical significance of the Trail in meeting the transportation needs of fur trappers, gold seekers, and goods transport. Iditarod NHT natural and cultural concerns are currently focused on the continued promotion of educational and recreational opportunities offered by this cultural resource.

### **3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

The cooperative agreements between federal, state, native corporation, and local agencies allow for the recreational use and management of the Trail. Volunteer organizations are also vital to the continued maintenance of the Trail. The discovery and maintenance of new and existing Trail segments continue to make the Iditarod NHT a valued recreational resource for both local and non-local visitors.

The BLM and other local agencies would like to see increased use of the Trail through the connection with other local trails and the general promotion of available recreational opportunities. In areas such as Girdwood and Seward there are opportunities to connect the Trail with other local recreational destinations to provide for multi-use visits to these towns.

## ■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

### 4.1 Unit Plans

Planning documents identified include:

- *The Iditarod National Historic Trail Seward to Nome Route: A Comprehensive Management Plan*, March 1986; and
- *The Girdwood-Iditarod Trail Route Study*, May 20, 1997.

### 4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

Due to the expanse of the Iditarod Trail the BLM has and will continue to coordinate with a number of federal, state, and local agencies. The Anchorage District Office of the BLM coordinates on a regular basis with local groups such as the Municipality of Anchorage, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, the USDA Forest Service, and the NPS (*Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program*). The BLM is also involved in public outreach activities through volunteer groups and public meetings for new Trail plans.

## ■ 5.0 Assessment of Need

### 5.1 Magnitude of Need

Due to the geographically and temporally dispersed activities of the Iditarod Trail an ATS would be difficult to sustain between major events and would need to cover a number of widely dispersed destinations. Improving the service levels of existing operations during events could be a way to mitigate the congestion that takes place during those times, in addition to making transit part of the visitor experience.

## 5.2 Feasible Alternatives

Potential ATS solutions may include the following:

- Improve the passenger service of the Alaska Railroad to connect the Seward cruise ship docking area to Anchorage and Wasilla through Girdwood. Suggested stops (or attractions) may include:
  - Seward, with an attractive pedestrian connection to the downtown or the Sea Life Center and a connection to the Kenai Fjords National Park;
  - Chugach National Forest trailheads;
  - Girdwood, with a stop at Iditarod trailhead and a connection to the Alyeska Ski Resort;
  - Anchorage, with a connection to downtown for summer activities and the ceremonial start of the Iditarod Race in the winter; and
  - Wasilla, with a connection to the new Iditarod Race Headquarters site (*adjacent to existing tracks*) including the implementation of adequate headways to allow for the potential cultural visit to the Race Museum in the race headquarters.
- Improve passenger service and rolling stock of the Seward Bus Company to provide better connections to the attractions along the Trail from Seward to Wasilla (see above) including the implementation of supplemental service during Iditarod Race activities; and
- Extend the Seward trolley service to provide stops at Kenai Fjords National Park or to provide demand responsive services to the Girdwood-Iditarod trailhead.

## ■ 6.0 Bibliography

*The Iditarod National Historic Trail Seward to Nome Route: A Comprehensive Management Plan*, March 1986.

*The Girdwood-Iditarod Trail Route Study*, May 20, 1997.

## ■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Mr. Mike Zaidlicz, Manager, Iditarod National Historic Trail